Issues of Merit

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Director's Perspective

The Fallacy of Face Time

In the last several years, Congress and the White House have provided a number of human resource management laws and programs to make the executive branch more family-friendly. Flexible work schedules, telecommuting or flexiplace, and the Family and Medical Leave Act are among the more notable of these initiatives. While providing obvious benefits to employees, they also represent gains for the government in terms of improved employee recruitment, retention, and motivation. Experience has shown, however, that a significant number of federal managers ignore or actively resist those initiatives. Many of these managers believe they're operating in the best interests of their organizations when, in fact, they may be doing exactly the opposite. Too frequently, these managers fail to focus on achieving organizational results and instead rely on inaccurate or outdated notions of workforce management—including the fallacy of face time.

"Face time" refers to the hours employees are physically present and visible to their supervisors. It's a term most likely to be heard where supervisors place great importance on their employees being at the worksite whenever they themselves are present. And if an employee is willing to put in extra hours or work weekends, even better. Obviously, so the reasoning goes, employees who spend more time at the worksite are more productive than employees who spend less time there. Time spent on the job becomes a major criterion for judging the relative value of employees and deciding how to distribute rewards.

Ironically, putting a high value on face time may actually be harmful to a high-performing organization. In a 1991 report to the President and

OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief:

Individuals hired into professional and administrative jobs in the federal government are almost always hired at the entry levels of GS-5 and GS-7.

Fact:
Before 1990, the vast majority of new entrants into professional and administrative jobs were hired at the GS-5 or GS-7 level, but since 1991, about a third of the new appointments for these positions were made at the GS-9 level.

Source: OPM Central Personnel Data File

Government Vacancy Announcements: We Can Do Better

In a recent review of a sample of government vacancy announcements posted on OPM's website (http://www.USAJOBS.opm.gov), we found that more often than not, federal job announcements are unattractive, uninviting, and off-putting. Generally, agencies advertising on USAJOBS don't present themselves or their vacancies in a manner that would entice potential applicants into public service, certainly not during a time when competition for top quality workers is as keen as it is today.

A review of the vacancy announcements reveals a confusing variety of formats and content, even among announcements from a single agency. Rarely is information presented in a standardized way so that prospective candidates can readily and accurately get information about the job openings. While there are statutes and OPM regulations specifying basic requirements for vacancy announcements, agencies exercise considerable latitude in their interpretation of those requirements. For example, in the absence of a requirement to

Director's Perspective

Congress titled "Balancing Work Responsibilities and Family Needs," the MSPB noted, "In today's work environment, the Federal Government and other major employers have found it is increasingly in their own best interests to offer some combination of benefit programs that can assist employees in meeting their personal needs and obligations while still becoming or remaining a productive member of the workforce."

Additional guidance since then, including another presidential memo in May 1999, has reinforced the federal government's official commitment to helping employees better balance their work and family obligations. This commitment is not based on altruistic sentiments but on the fact that such programs can have a positive impact on achieving organizational results.

Naturally, not every job provides the same opportunities for flexible work arrangements. Jobs that require public contact or access to specialized equipment demand that employees be present at the worksite. Museum guards and air traffic controllers can't work at home. But when foregoing a flexible work arrangement or spending extra time at work become highly valued behaviors in their own right, and not because they further organizational objectives, the work unit can be negatively affected. For example, highly productive employees who don't put in large amounts of face time—or employees who are simply not highly visible—will soon be discouraged by the lack of positive feedback for their good work.

As MSPB also noted in its 1992 report, "A Question of Equity: Women and the Glass Ceiling,"

Assumptions are often made. . .that an employee who devotes extra time to the job each week, above and beyond 40 hours, is automatically more committed, more career-oriented, and generally a better employee than one who devotes "only" 40 hours a week. Without tying in productivity and output, however, this could easily be a wrong assumption. . .It's certainly possible for a well-organized, highly capable 40-hour-a-week employee to consistently outproduce a less capable, less organized 50-hour-a-week employee.

We do not contend that managers who value employees at least partly on the basis of "face time" do so maliciously. On the contrary, most of those managers are probably very committed to mission accomplishment. It's likely that their negative opinions about flexible work arrangements are based on a sincere belief that the employees they don't see as much contribute less to the organization than employees who are more visible. However, to reiterate the caveat drawn from MSPB's prior research—such a belief is too often simply a fallacy.

This is the era of the Results Act, and a time when there is tough competition for well qualified and motivated employees. Instead of being judged by their work schedules or the number of hours they put in, productive employees expect to be judged on their accomplishments and contributions. Managers owe it to themselves, their agencies, and their employees to develop a good, results-oriented method for measuring each employee's relative contribution to the organization. Agencies, in turn, owe managers and supervisors assistance in developing the skills they need to assess employees in the new, flexible work environment. Finally, each manager and supervisor needs to consciously avoid using performance measures that are not clearly linked to the results they need to achieve. It's time for managers to stop prizing presence at the worksite as much as productivity in the job.

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Vacancy Announcements

post the number of job openings covered by a vacancy announcement, many agencies omit this useful piece of information. Others include the number of job openings in the "duty location" field of the announcement, using entries such as "MANY WASHINGTON DC," or "FEW NE PHIL PA." Visitors to USAJOBS are left to figure out for themselves what these obscure terms might mean. After reading a number of such announcements an applicant might catch on that the terms refer to the number of openings. But it's not immediately apparent when viewing a single announcement, especially where the duty location entry reads—as did one that we reviewed—"0001 CINTI, OH."

It also appears that nobody's paying much attention to the visual attractiveness of announcements posted on USAJOBS. While the rather unstylish type font used for all the announcements may reflect current technological limitations, there is little reason for the extensive use of the difficult-to-read all-caps format. In addition, the word-wrap of many announcements (both on screen and in print) tends to run each line of text partially onto a second line, making for difficult reading and a doubling of the length of a printed announcement. Again, this is the likely result of technical problems, but until solving those problems is given a high enough priority the government's vacancy announcements will continue to be unpleasant to look at

and hard to read. That may not drive applicants away, but it's not an encouraging introduction to potential government employment. At a minimum, until USAJOBS permits the use of more attractive fonts, vacancy announcements can be made more attractive and easier to read by creating the original announce-

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ments with margins and line breaks suitable for the USAJOBS website, and dispensing with the use of all caps in heads and text.

Most disconcerting is the difficulty applicants are likely to encounter in trying to figure out what a job is all about and what's required to apply for it. Most announcements offer potential applicants few details about the vacant job, its location, working environment, the chances of being selected, or even the qualifications required. Only one of the announcements in our sample indicated how long it might take to complete the entire hiring process (7–9 months in that case). Announcements declared "open to everyone" are frequently loaded with bureaucratic jargon. What must aspiring civil servants from outside the government think when they read phrases such as "no PCS intern positions," "ICTAP eligibles will be given priority selection consideration," "this is a merit program & delegated examining joint announcement," or "positions may be filled on a career-conditional, term, or temporary basis as needed"? Trying to find out what's required to apply for a vacancy often

amounts to sorting through a maze of options and fuzzy instructions. Some of this complexity can be attributed to the widespread practice of using single announcements for multiple positions or for both internal and external applicants.

Clearly we can do better, and agencies should adopt the perspective of a potential applicant, then take a close look at their vacancy announcements as they appear on USAJOBS. Such a review can suggest some relatively simple adjustments that can make the announcements much more intelligible and attractive. Understanding that we are still in the early stages of applying an immature technology to our recruiting and selection processes, we would be well-served to devote additional resources to the technologies to ensure that good candidates will not be deterred from Federal employment. We need to view applicants as customers, and treat them the way we would want to be treated. Hiring the best and brightest is a competition that the government won't win by being indifferent to the manner in which it communicates with prospective employees.

Chance for Feds to Speak Out

This fall some 20,000 civilian employees will have an opportunity to tell federal policymakers and managers what they think about their work and the workplace. The employees will be randomly selected to complete MSPB's Merit Principles Survey 2000. In cooperation with executive branch departments and agencies, MSPB conducts this major survey every three years to monitor the health of the civil service, to ensure adherence to the merit system principles, and to obtain employee views about a variety of current HR management issues. Although a number of other organizations, including OPM and

NPR, have found value in surveying employees, MSPB's Merit Principles Survey is unique in that it has been administered regularly since 1983, providing federal leaders with a wealth of comparative data to help them stimulate discussion on HR matters and shape HR policy decisions.

Court Makes Whistleblower Retaliation Harder to Prove

Ever since Ernest Fitzgerald, a high-ranking career federal employee, lost his job in the early 1970s for informing Congress about massive military cost overruns, there has been a widespread belief that federal whistleblowers need to be—and deserve to be—protected against retaliatory actions. Because of that belief and because disclosures of fraud, waste, and abuse can save money and improve government operations, Congress included provisions in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 that made it unlawful for supervisors to threaten or penalize employees for whistleblowing.

On several occasions since then, Congress has revisited this issue. In 1989, in a move that effectively expanded statutory whistle-blower protections, Congress granted whistleblowers the right to appeal to the Board on their own behalf if, afer filing with the Office of the Special Counsel, they had not succeeded in getting that office to act for them.

But whistleblower protections cannot be had merely for the asking, as a recent Federal Circuit Court decision, *Lachance v. White*, 174 F.3d 1378, (Fed. Cir. 1999) demonstrates. That decision imposes a strong, hard-to-meet burden of proof on employees who allege retaliation for disclosures relating to mismanagement. The case involved a GS-13 Air Force supervisory education services

specialist who was reassigned after criticizing revisions to agency policies that he believed would result in a serious reduction of on-base education opportunities.

A Board decision finding the employee's reassignment to be retaliatory was overturned by the Court, which held that to prove such retaliation, the employee must prove not only (1) that he was familiar with the alleged improper activities and (2) that others shared his beliefs, but also (3) that a disinterested observer, knowing what the employee knew, would reasonably conclude that the actions of the government displayed gross mismanagement. The Court asserted that there must be a presumption that public officers perform their duties properly and fairly, and that unless the employee could irrefutably disprove this presumption, his allegations of mismanagement should not be protected. The Court held that a "review of the Air Force's policy and implementation . . . may well show them to be entirely appropriate, even if not the best option" and that the whistleblowing laws were not enacted to serve as a "weapon in arguments over policy."

The Court's decision in this case makes it clear that the treatment of whistleblower allegations in the government is still evolving. Whistleblowers have not previously had to show that their allegations were true, but only that they reasonably thought their allegations were true. Now, under *Lachance v. White*, it will be more difficult for whistleblowers to establish that what they believed was reasonable.

The Positive Side of Turmoil

Over the past several years many changes have occurred that have had a dramatic impact on federal workers. Agencies have been engaging in reinvention efforts and thereby finding new ways of doing business. Many organizations have placed a greater emphasis on customer satisfaction. The federal workforce has been downsized by over 300,000 positions. Whether this type of change and the turmoil it creates are likely to end in the foreseeable future, and what that might mean for federal employees, are among the issues being addressed by some leading high-tech firms that a senior OPE staff member recently visited in California's Silicon Valley.

Our visit to these companies provided the opportunity to discuss how they and the people who work for them survive in a highly competitive and rapidly changing environment. What we learned is that these companies

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operate on the belief that continual change is the way of the future. From their perspective, change is occurring at an ever-accelerating rate. All of the firms we visited had the view that if they themselves did not change they would cease to exist. Not surprisingly, these companies frequently found themselves being reorganized and, consequently, for their employees reorganization has become a way of life.

What we found particularly interesting is that many of the people who work for these organizations have come not only to accept change as a way of life, but, in fact, seem to thrive in this sort of environment. Working in an organization that is constantly changing has many benefits.

Employees in these companies seem to find work exciting and challenging. People are able to continually reinvent their jobs and take on new roles in their organizations. Many of the employees we talked to feel empowered by the chance to show what they can do without undue fear of failure, since they can expect to be given a new opportunity to succeed if things don't work out. The result is a workforce that is more able to adapt to changing conditions and more aware of and open to alternative ways of doing business.

What are the lessons for government organizations? Certainly technology will continue to move forward and as it does it will continue to have a profound effect on how the government does business. To position themselves to take advantage of changes as they occur and to best serve the public, federal organizations, like the firms in Silicon Valley, need to embrace the concept of change rather than consider it something that will go away in time. Similarly, federal employees need to begin to think of change and reorganizations as opportunities to show what they can do and not something that they should fear. For this to happen managers will have to give employees the chance to rise to new challenges and the opportunity to fail without damaging their careers. Agencies will need to realize that the way they do business may have to change dramatically every few years if they are to provide the best possible service to the public. And public policymakers will have to be open to adjustments in the way work is organized and compensated (under the government's classification system, for example) in order to bring these revolutionary changes in the federal work environment into the realm of possibility.

Of course, in considering the continually-evolving Silicon Valley firms as a model for handling change, we have to acknowledge

that there are inescapable differences between private sector enterprises and most federal organizations. But there are also the kinds of similarities that are an inevitable result of human beings' natural reactions to their work environment, regardless of who's paying their salaries. And, in the final analysis, it's the way that the firms we visited deal with these universal characteristics of human nature that the federal government would do well to emulate.

Interested In Employee Turnover?

Lately we've noticed a renewed interest in our MSPB reports "Who is Leaving the Federal Government? An Analysis of Employee Turnover" (1989) and "Why Are Employees Leaving the Federal Government? Results of an Exit Survey" (1990). Those who want to know more about this subject may wish to consult two other MSPB reports, "Working for America: An Update" and "The Changing Federal Workplace" which present the results of MSPB's 1992 and 1996 Merit Principles Surveys. Similarly, a June 1992 General Accounting Office report, "Federal Employment: How Federal Employees View the Government as a Place to Work" (GGD-92-91) provides results from a representative sample of survey respondents. Although these are not recent publications, they do include useful information about the reasons employees stay in or leave federal service.

There are also a number of websites that include discussions of employee turnover. While the following list is by no means exhaustive, these sites can provide useful information or links to other resources for managing turnover and designing exit survey programs.

• *http://humanresources.tqn.com/ library/weekly/mpreviss.htm*—

Discussions, references, and links to a variety of HR topics, including exit surveys.

• *http://www.uncc.edu/ragiacal/ exitframes.html*—An exit interview and survey homepage, with references

• *http://ourworld.compuserve. com/homepages/gately/pp15js00. htm*—Index page for nearly 80 HR articles and resources, including turnover and exit interviews.

• *http://www.labor.state.ak.us/ handbook/guide.htm*—While there undoubtedly are similar guides for other states, this page is from the Alaska state employers handbook and includes sections on turnover, exit interviews, and more.

• *http://www.ipma-hr.org/research/ personnel.html*—This research component of the International Personnel Management Association contains links to many HR issues, including turnover and exit surveys. Additional access is available to agency members.

• *http://www.blissassociates.com/ articles.html#5*—Offers factors to consider in calculating the cost of turnover.

• *http://www.ipmaac.org/cgi-bin/ phb.pl/listarch/arch7/msg00186. html?turnover#first_hit*—A novel employee selection strategy to help manage turnover.

• *http://www.b4uhire.com/exit/ exitintp3.htm*—Example of an exit interview topic checklist and options for outsourcing exit interviewing.

While these sites may prove useful in developing a systematic exit survey or interview program, there are some important points to consider before implementing such a program:

• Except in large, high-turnover agencies, the number of exit survey respondents will be small, making the results less reliable than surveys with large samples. Sample size can be a particular problem if you wish to analyze the data according

to type of separation, grade level, and type of occupation. Analyses by sex or race/national origin will further diminish the size of each group in the sample, making the findings less and less reliable.

• Many employees who resign will not be inclined to burn their bridges by speaking negatively about their experiences, if there are any negatives to report. Trusted third parties in the agency or outside vendors often can help establish a professional climate and confidential gathering of information.

• Consider alternatives to traditional exit interviews or surveys. For example, interviews conducted several months after separation may find respondents more objective and less reluctant to share their opinions than during the time immediately preceding their departure. Interviewing current employees to find out why they remain or whether and why they're planning to leave can also be a useful source of information for managing employee turnover.

• Agencies are required to obtain clearance from the Office of Management and Budget to survey members of the general public. Because former employees are in that category any program to systematically interview or survey them must be approved by OMB.

Note: the websites listed above are provided as a service to our readers. We do not endorse any service or products offered on these websites nor do we vouch for the accuracy of the information contained in them.
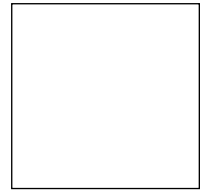
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